Translation and religion

Translation and Religion: Crafting Regimes of Identity

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Introduction[1]

It would not be an overstatement to observe that religions translate ubiquitously. But translations undertaken in religious contexts do not occur merely at the linguistic, and perhaps the more explicit, level. What is also involved, in principle, is translation on a conceptual plane that influences the way religions relate to other phenomena (that may or may not be recognized as 'religious') structurally. These two planes, the linguistic and conceptual, labour together, even act on each other in complex ways to perform the multiple forms of translation that can be identified in religious contexts. Different aspects of a religion may be promoted and translated differently and to different degrees, but religions would not survive without the ability to translate, even if understood in the most primary sense of 'translating' divinity, through any form or medium, for a human audience. Scriptural translation is only one aspect of translation that manifests itself in the travel of religions. In practice, a much broader range of what is understood as 'sacred' literature by each religious tradition is translated for ritual practices, or devotional purposes, including forms of poetry, music and recitation that are co-constructed by religious communities and function within broader religious and social cultures. A 'sacred text' broadly defined is any text, object or sound perceived as sacred or holy or used for any purpose considered sacred by a faith community. Given the myriad ways in which ideas and experiences of the sacred manifest themselves, either within organised religions or at the margins of, including beyond the control of institutionalised religions, what is translation in the religious context and to what extent do *conceptualisations* as well as practices of translation influence the way religions travel?

To address this question, this special issue focuses on a matter of some complexity and significance in the study of religions in translation: the issue of identity. It draws on current debates from translation studies which offer new perspectives with which to unpack the much discussed and contested understandings of identity. I highlight at the outset the double meaning of the term 'identity' and propose to complicate the relationship between religion, language and translation by drawing attention to an inherent aporia in current uses of the term identity. The most common treatment of the term 'identity', particularly in the academic discourse in the humanities, denotes a unique or peculiar self-understanding (as an individual or

community), a distinct quality that is perceived as constitutive of the individual or community concerned. Although the term identity is thus employed to stress the uniqueness and distinctness of a certain individual or community, there is a fundamental contradiction embedded in this sense of identity as Gleason argues through an examination of the semantic history of identity: there is confusion between "whether identity is to be understood as something internal that persists through change or something ascribed from without that changes according to circumstance" (Gleason 1983: 918). The distinction between ontological discussions of identity as separate from those of cultural distinctiveness needs further elaboration but whether attributed to internal or external genesis, identity in this sense is what remains peculiar and unique to the individual or community. It is often overlooked, however, that this distinct and constant core is only one sense of the term, which emerged in the first half of the 20th century in social sciences and gained popularity in the 1950s (Philip Gleason 1983; Walker and Leedham-Green 2010). The older and primary meaning of the term identity, as we know it from philosophical and mathematical debates concerns a relation between two things that are one and the same, that which is duplicate or a perfect match between two objects, shape or ideas. In mathematical terms, identity refers to an equation that is true no matter what values are chosen. Mathematical identity can be proved by using two or more methods of calculations to arrive at the same answer (Du Sautoy 2010). For a mathematician like Du Sautoy, numeric, symmetrical or topological identity offering different ways to compare identical structures are exciting because "the best equations are those that show that two seemingly very different ideas are in fact identical" (2010:103). This latter sense points to an underlying notion of identity which has led to the current secondary understanding of the term as the quality of a person that remains the same, that is, identical with itself, over the course of time and across space and therefore can be reproduced through a range of technologies. Drawing on a further mathematical formulation, the idea of 'translational symmetry' (referred to simply as 'translation' in primary math classrooms) challenges us to think about the implication of identical relations between shapes when moved and returned such that the object does not seem to have moved at all. Translational symmetry also allows the mathematician to duplicate the pattern infinitely, creating infinite and perfectly aligned 'identities.'

Without dwelling on this further, what is clear is that there is an inherent contradiction that has become normative to the way identity' continues to be used. Although the two meanings of the term 'identity' are connected, it is ironical that in current debates they are often used to convey two contradictory notions–the notion of distinctness as well as the notion of sameness. One may therefore be expected to carry or present 'identity cards' at border crossings where a two-dimensional image on plastic is meant to simultaneously duplicate the human face (with the possibility that infinite such copies can be produced) yet represent its identity as unique. How the concept of identity is meant to establish a link or translate (in the mathematical sense) between an individual's sense of their (unique) self and their fingerprint or the

more recent forms of biometric identity-taking needs further investigation. What are the implications of this contradiction in present understandings of identity for the study of translation between human sign systems, and in particular what we have come to term 'language'? One way of thinking about translating between languages has been precisely this: that a text in one language can be moved into another language such that it aligns perfectly with an identical shape because languages share structural symmetry. This view dominated approaches to translation in the 1950s and 60s, exemplified in Eugene Nida's proposition of 'dynamic equivalence.' But it is this very contradiction in the term identity I have drawn out so far—of a sacred text unique to itself yet capable of being endlessly replicated—that also led to the theoretical dismantling of dynamic equivalence.

Religions and translations both have a paradoxical relationship with identity precisely because of this double sense of the word. The category 'Christian' or 'Muslim,' for instance, can both be applied to define an individual's belief as uniquely different from all other observed phenomena of human beliefs but also taken to indicate this individual's belonging to and participation in similar or identical beliefs to all others within the group. Moreover, this incongruity is particularly visible in the way translations in religious contexts rely on creating direct correspondence or 'identity' between religious concepts and linguistic sign systems and presenting this as self-evident truth. In this special issue, we wish to investigate mechanisms operative both within religion and translation which claim to establish unique identities by constructing likeness or identity between two given categories.

The traction between the two senses of identity has been fundamental to the setting up of religion as an object of academic study. Historically, the modern debate on religion emerged in Europe at a time when knowledge of human societies with a range of different cultural understandings and practices widened and European travellers reported about beliefs and practices irreconcilable with their own. The transition from 'religion' to 'religions' in post-Enlightenment European thought is of significance (Smith, 1963) as it is with this acknowledgement of plurality that the need to recognize identities between religions arises. What in the identity of the new could be recognized as *identical* to the 'religion' already known? The answer to this question determined whether a newly observed 'religion' was admitted into the category Religion. The study of religions (and importantly, the comparative study of religions) still rests on the hypothesis of identity or likeness between two separate sets of phenomena, each recognizable as 'Religion,' in order to trace similarities and differences between them. At the same time, each religion is also recognised as possessing some unique characteristics that differentiate them from other specific religions.

Equally, translation as a concept hinges on assumptions of identity between languages and texts. Languages must first be recognized or identified as valid sign

systems before transfers between them can be conceived. The possibility of translation can only be entertained when we can perceive two distinct but unique entities, whether linguistic or other sign systems, which can apparently stand in for each other. This construction of identity between languages is the central postulation that apparently makes translation a viable act. Conversely, recognizing a text as a 'translation' implies a willingness to accept the construction of identity or continuity between two texts across two separate languages or sign systems.

In this special issue, we draw attention to the polysemic nature of the concept of identity that can, in current usage, at once indicate sameness and uniqueness. As we know, however, neither sameness and continuity nor distinctness and difference are natural givens but are constructed in and by the very act of comparison. It is this constructed double nature of identity that I want to draw attention to in bringing together religion and translation concepts. In both cases, there is first an identification of uniqueness (read, difference) followed by an assumption of commensurability. The framework of identity in the double senses of the term is a powerful discursive 'regime' or schema that systematizes and orders the way we approach the very concepts of religion and translation, such that every time we make a comparison, we are called on to superimpose the identity of one religion or language on another. Recent theoretical and methodological engagements in translation studies have highlighted the anomalies created by the reiteration of equivalence as a concept central to the critical understanding of translatability (Hermans 2006; Pym 2007, 2010). In short, the establishing of linguistic and textual equivalence is a political act. Drawing on scholarship that underscores the constructed nature of identification or likeness between unequal language systems that must be assumed in translation projects, this special issue examines the construction and ascription of equivalences to conceptual terms as they travel between religions. Since the politics of such constructions and their uses become most evident in translation, the contributions focus on how and to what extent conceptions and processes of translation have determined both academic and popular understandings of religions in the past and may continue to do so in the present.

I argue that an investigation into the paradoxical link to issues of identity shared by 'translation' and 'religion' will be productive for an innovative understanding of the mechanisms of identity formation in a variety of cultural spheres. This critical frame allows us to unpack how the human phenomena understood as 'religion' is constructed and organizes social formation. The focus on translation opens up key epistemological questions about the study of the nature and practices of religions and, importantly, of how constructions of religious identity depend on the establishing of 'identitas' between categories of religion. The specific translation projects and debates discussed in this special issue provide an excellent basis for a structured presentation of cultural 'regimes' that operate in the formation of religious identity—in both senses of the word. That is, how translation both makes possible the comparison of religions

and in doing so becomes a discursive tool by way of which specific concepts can be claimed as unique to each religion. Claims of untranslatability, therefore, play a great role in asserting uniqueness: what 'cannot' be translated into another religion or language is therefore precisely what makes a specific religious category particularly distinctive.

For these very reasons, an additional and more general aim of this special issue is to demonstrate that a consideration of translation concepts and methods is indispensable to the comparative study of religions. Following on from Said's (1978) theorisation of the ideological potency of representation, several scholars of religion have pointed to the regulatory role played by 'descriptions' of the cultures of Asia and Africa: de Roover refers to a "particular descriptive framework and its theoretical terms" whereby, "through a process of selection and theoretical reflection, a fairly coherent set of dominant descriptions of Indian culture came into being in Western Europe" (2015: 10). What I have argued elsewhere (Israel 2011) and return to here since this is an important point, is that translation functions as a key mode for the interpretation and evaluation of religions, languages and cultures. Translation was a form of description that under the mask of neutrality and transparency either sought to justify an already existing identity that was assumed or set itself the task of creating identity where none existed. Further, since translation involves comparative moves across linguistic and sacred domains, the work of translation—its processes, purposes and effects—helps to make visible the terms of comparison. It is in the context of eighteenth and nineteenth century European translation projects that key statements about the nature of religious beliefs and practices in different parts of world were made by Europeans. One example from the missionary project of Bible translation in India illustrates this point well: Protestant missionaries claimed that the uniquely 'translatable' nature of its scriptures was important evidence that it was divine truth as opposed to other religious traditions, such as the 'false' Brahmanical Hinduism or Islam, which 'resisted' translation out of the Sanskrit or Arabic. The resulting wide debate on scripture and translation in India, posed questions on how 'scripture' ought to be defined and introduced 'translatability' as a new and principal criteria by which to measure and define the parameters of each religion in India. Such debates as well as translations of sacred texts from India, for instance the Bhagavat Gita in Latin and German translations (Herling 2006), also provoked parallel discussions in Europe on the nature and status of sacred texts in the religions newly encountered and how these may compare with the Bible. The 'discovery' of a pseudo-translation, the *Ezourvedam*, was another such 'sacred text' hailed in mid-eighteenth century French intellectual circles as an indication of the 'higher,' philosophical monotheism as the basis of Hindu India and of India as the cradle of civilization and used to critique Christian Europe.[2] We can see therefore how the task of translation provided an interpretative framework for the work of comparison and definition. This interpretative function of translation calls for a thorough investigation of how translation strategies and choice,

those seemingly ideologically neutral and innocuous linguistic activity, result in epistemic reordering of knowledge on religions.

A two-pronged approach to translation, that is, translation as conceptual *and* linguistic transfer, is based on theoretical and methodological approaches of Descriptive Translation Studies. Unlike Prescriptive Translation Studies, which until the 1980s aimed at identifying 'right' translation strategies that would result in 'equivalent' translations, or at comparing translations to originals to establish whether it was a 'good translation,' Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS) challenges such bases of translation scholarship. Instead, DTS highlights the importance of studying the historical and social factors controlling the transfer of contingent, multiple meanings from one language and culture to another, and the conditions under which translations are produced and read. From this perspective, languages are not universal or equal and attempts to arrive at 'equivalence' is an ideological construct that may serve larger political agendas beyond the linguistic and textual (Hermans 1999). Equally the apparent 'translatability' or 'untranslatability' of a text is defined by political contexts and evaluation is a historical, political process (Bassnett-McGuire 1980) which raises new questions, such as who is in a position of power to evaluate and for whom translations are evaluated. This broad DTS theoretical framework that translation is not ideologically neutral or transparent but is circumscribed and regulated by various forces at a given historical moment, can fruitfully inform investigations of sacred texts in translation. Although the effects of translation in unequal hierarchies of power is a theme that has been advanced by scholars studying translation and postcolonialism (Bassnett and Trivedi 1999, Niranjana 1992), postcolonial translation approaches have not paid sufficient attention to the effects of translation in the religious context. This special issue will it is expected address this gap in postcolonial translation scholarship by foregrounding religions in translation by asking, to what extent do religions define translation in theory or in practice even as they use translation to survive or proliferate?

This involves studying translation strategies such as the intended or actual function of source and translated texts, the type of text considered sacred or holy by a faith community; which power networks govern translation processes. Broad translation choices with ideological implications regarding which texts are selected for translation at a given historical point, regarding textual form and genre, language registers and the audience are complimented by investigation of translation issues such as 'translational norms', 'manipulation', socio-cultural constraints and 'regularities' of translation behaviour. The status of sacred text translators, whether they are 'visible' through paratextual materials such as translators' prefaces, footnotes, glossaries etc. or obscured. The reception of translations amongst the faith communities, that is, whether a sacred text continues to function as a sacred text in translation rather than lose its sacred status to a literary or philosophical work. Which texts are retranslated repeatedly and for what purpose? These broad translation

approaches and strategies dovetail into investigations of a range of infinitesimal linguistic choices that translators may deploy from compensation, explication, adaptation, appropriation and borrowing to deliberate or inadvertent omission, mistranslation or over-translation; they may use relay or pivot languages to access texts in a third language, invent neologisms or even paraphrase. Translators are acutely aware of the specifics of what a term may convey to different audiences such that they may not choose a dictionary equivalence, rather what would be appropriate and acceptable for the specific readers of their translations.

Given the mutability of religions and the pervasive presence of translation in the lives of and interactions between religious traditions, how do we study the relationship between 'translation' and 'religion'? Rather than view translation merely as a mechanical transaction between two languages, the contributors therefore take into account a wider complex process of negotiation between two or more cultures, where every translation act is an act of interpretation that have political and cultural implications.

Scholarly debates on equivalence and commensurability: the construction of identity

Scholarly examination of the intersection of translation and religion is neither extensive in translation studies nor religious studies despite the concern both scholarly traditions display regarding the philosophical and material transfer of ideas, texts and practices and the kinds of transformations these engender in new historical and cultural contexts. Translation studies, which as an academic discipline can be traced back to the late 1970s, has been dominated by Bible translation, mainly theological, historical, linguistic issues and more recently cultural politics. There have also been a few studies of the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'an in translation studies but most of these have focused mainly on the linguistic challenges of translation and translatability, thus offering a narrower perspective on the translation histories of these texts. There has been some work on the translation of the Buddhist sutras into Chinese (Hung 2005, Cheung 2006, St. Andre 2010, Neather, forthcoming) but the vast amounts of scholarship beyond these have been written in Chinese and is inaccessible to scholars who do not work with the language. This has meant that despite the comparative framework within which studies of translation are necessarily conducted, current scholarship has tended to remain atomised with little conversation across religious or linguistic boundaries. Religious studies scholars have been prolific translators and commentators of sacred texts but despite this interest in translation, there has been a long-standing tendency to regard translation as a transparent and mechanical act with no real consequence to the substance of the texts translated. Alan Williams pointed to this lack of critical interest in translation amongst religionists in 2004, and fifteen years later, Arvind Pal Mandair asks: "Why then has translation not been considered on a par with other key concepts or 'critical terms' in the study of religion?" (Mandair 2017: 173), showing that remarkably little has changed in the intervening

years despite the number of critical directions and abundance of approaches that have developed within translation studies. There have been comparatively few in-depth critical engagements with translation as a critical and interpretative framework with which to study religion.

Two edited volumes bring together translation and religion in the last two decades. The first was edited by the translation studies scholar, Lynne Long's *Translation and Religion: Holy Untranslatable* (2005) focused on what might render 'holy texts' translatable or untranslatable. Although the contributors examine a wider range of sacred texts, including Buddhist, Sikh and Sufi besides the Christian and Hebrew Bible as well as the Qur'an, the investigation of what renders a sacred text untranslatable, that is either its content or context, is limited and at times conservative. The second, more recent edited volume by religious studies scholars, Michael P. Dejonge and Christiane Tietz, entitled, *Translating Religion: What is Lost and Gained?* (2015) point to the convergence of interests between translation and religion, emphasizing that "translation theory and not just practice developed in close relationship with religion" (2015: 2). But they delineate this theme further in their introduction only in relation to the Judeo-Christian theological and metaphysical assumptions of translation. Contributions range from discussions of the translation of Christian sacred texts to Western translations of the *Daodejing* and of Vedic texts as well as one that focuses on Habermas's call to translating religious language into secular language. While these contributors widen existing scholarship, the framework of what is 'lost' or 'gained' in translation restricts the scope of the discussions. Besides these volumes, there are, two full length books that offer more nuanced studies of translation as a critical framework with which to study religion and speak more directly to the themes of this special issue. Naomi Seidman's *Faithful Renderings: Jewish-Christian Different and the Politics of Translation* (2006) and Arvind Pal Mandair's *Religion and the Specter of the West* (2009). Both scholars engage with translation and translatability as a form that fundamentally constructs religious traditions. Seidman examines the fraught history of Jewish-Christian relationships as one primarily of translation politics. She argues that the performances of translation are events through which the religious 'Other' is created and in this very act plays a crucial part in identity formation. In her examination of issues of faithfulness and translatability in different projects of linguistic translation including that of the Bible she attends to the power dynamics that shape the discourses on theological and cultural translation. Mandair examines the western discourse on religion more broadly and focuses specifically on the formation of Sikhism first as a 'religion' in colonial India and then as 'world religion' by historicising and critiquing a universalist conception of translation as transparency. His argument that colonial intellectual Sikh elites adopted this 'theology of translation' to claim a Sikh identity as *different* from Hindu is an important contribution to scholarship in the subfield of translation and religion but more pertinent to this volume is his demonstration of the loss of linguistic and conceptual polyvalence that led Sikhs to conform to specific European constructs and idioms

describing the category religion. Both scholars focus on translation not as linguistic translation but as a discursive form of cultural commensurability to effect or negate identity within complex dynamics of power, an aspect that is also central to this special issue's focus on identity.

It is pertinent at this point to map some key debates relating translation to commensurability and identity in religious studies, anthropology and translation studies. Both academic disciplines of translation and religions have antecedents in comparative studies and methods.[3] The more specific act of comparison within translation studies is between a given text and its 'translation,' however this is defined, in one or more languages. Further, one of the acknowledged disciplinary precursors to translation studies is comparative literary studies, its principal interest being the comparison of literatures across two or more languages. In fact, many translation studies scholars and departments were first trained in comparative literature and it is only since the late 1980s that translation studies has sought to distinguish itself as a discipline distinct from comparative literature. Its other trajectory can of course be traced back to the history of Bible translation, Christian mission history and missionary linguistics, where comparative questions relating both to languages and religions were at the forefront of critical thinking on translation.[4] Likewise, as several scholars of religious studies have pointed out, the study of religions as an academic discipline too has its roots in comparative methodology. Theoretical approaches to equivalence and identity in both disciplines are thus heavily predicated on how one understands and interprets difference and how one approaches the question of commensurability.

Comparison as a critical tool has similarly drawn critical comment in religious studies. Labelling "comparison an invention" Jonathan Smith posits "a dilemma that can be stated in stark form: *is comparison an enterprise of magic or science*? Thus far, comparison appears to be more a matter of memory than a project for inquiry; it is more impressionistic than methodical" (1982: 22). His contention that religion was "solely the creation of the scholar's study…created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalisation" (1982: xi) makes the important connection between comparison as an academic construct and its deployment in the construction of religion as an academic discipline for study. Wilfred Cantwell Smith's analyses of translations of religious materials in the West had demonstrated that Christian theologians and enlightenment scholars played a large part in developing the idea that observed religions in different parts of the world could be measured and compared with each other on the assumption that there was a commonality between all of them that allowed for comparison in the first place. Since then several religious studies scholars have advanced the "Western construction of religion" thesis in relation to the category 'World religions' (most notable amongst these being Dubuisson 2003, Masuzawa 2005, Jonathan Smith 1982 etc) or specific religions such as Hinduism (Bloch et. al. 2010, Sugirtharajah 2003, Sweetman 2003), though mostly without a detailed investigation of translation's constitutive role.[5]

There is a noteworthy exception in the use of translation as a methodological tool in Smith's analysis however. Wilfred Cantwell Smith ([1963] 2009), was one of the earliest twentieth century scholars of religion to offer a critical analysis of the academic study of religion in Europe and the genealogy of the term 'religion' in the western intellectual traditions. He argued that the current understanding of the term is an imagined and constructed category by tracing historic realignments between singular and plural conceptualisations of the term and the transition from religion as inner piety to religion as a system of belief, "a concept of schematic externalization that reflected, and served, the clash of conflicting religious parties" (2009: 23-24). What is singular in his inspection of the term and concept 'religion,' already "notoriously difficult to define," (2009: 6) is his frequent attention to *translation* to systematically unpick the shifting uses of the term over centuries. In the chapter entitled "'Religion' in the West," he examines historic and current translations of key Latin Christian texts to point out "serious misrepresentation[s] in the translation" (2009: 19). He gives us evidence from Jerome who "introduced the term *religio* at a few places in his Latin translation of the Bible, fixing it therefore in the Western Christian tradition" (2009: 13), to nineteenth-century translations of John Calvin's *Christianae Religionis Institutio* as "*Institutes of the Christian Religion*" and modern translations of St. Augustine's *De Vera Religione* as "On the True Religion."[6] In his view, the addition of the article "the" to the translated titles of both Calvin's and St. Augustine's influential texts radically changed the authors' adjectival use, from 'Christian piety' or 'Christian worship' to "Christianity" as a systematic religion (2009: 14-19). Further, he critically analyses the history of the conceptual category religion in the West by highlighting the extent to which, Christianity was established as 'a' religion as a result of comparative methods pressed into service to gauge whether other observed phenomenon could also be considered religions. In Smith's analysis, such observed phenomena that may not necessarily have been commensurable in the first place began to be discussed as part of the single discursive category that came to be termed religion. To extend his analysis further, one of the results of such comparisons has fed the idea that equivalence in linguistic translations of religious texts are conceptually viable.

Translation, or more precisely a critique of "cultural translation," has been at the very centre of a stimulating debate in anthropology, and especially anthropology of religion. Challenging the evolutionary and hierarchical division of the world's cultures that was dominant in nineteenth-century European discourse, anthropologist Franz Boas (1858-1942) and anthropologist linguists Edward Sapir (1884-1939) and Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941) who followed, argued that different languages indicated different experiences of the world. Each distinct language displays constructions of distinct realities but none were superior to others. Taken to its logical conclusion, this 'different but equal' argument implies that since languages determine one's response to and experiences of the world, what is expressed in one language

cannot be put into another. “The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation" Sapir (1958:69). In short, this linguistic relativity, one might say even linguistic determinism, posits translation as impossible. In what terms then does the anthropologist understand and represent cultural difference? Talal Asad’s (1986) critique of British social anthropology drawing attention to the issue of language and translation is one of the most cited examples of this debate. His argument that the comparative framework underlying Anglo-American social anthropological studies of the world’s cultures, which allows them to write complex cultural phenomena in terms of a “scientifically objective” language of disciplinary and institutionalised textuality, is a form of “cultural translation” uses translation as a conceptual metaphor to critique the comparative methodologies that are often deployed as self-evident by anthropologists. Since then, several anthropologists have continued to wrestle with how the anthropologist may understand a ‘foreign’ culture on its own terms rather than represent it as unintelligible, inferior or irrational (Tambiah 1990).

This line of argument has been given further impetus with the more recent “ontological turn” that draws our attention to the problem of the comparative method in studying difference. In a stimulating critique of the comparative epistemology that anthropologists routinely engage in which results in the ‘translation’ of the “native’s practical and discursive concepts” into the language of “anthropology’s conceptual apparatus,” the Brazilian anthropologist Viveiros de Castro (2004:4-5) has proposed the term “controlled equivocation” to reconceptualise comparative procedures in anthropology. Translation in his view as a form of controlled equivocation can be understood as: “To translate is to situate oneself in the space of the equivocation and to dwell there…To translate is to emphasize or potentialize the equivocation, that is, to open and widen the space imagined not to exist between the conceptual languages in contact, a space that the equivocation precisely concealed….To translate is to presume that an equivocation already exists; it is to communicate by differences, instead of silencing the Other by presuming a univocality—the essential similarity—between what the Other and We are saying” (2004: 10). This potential of equivocation rests in the semantic space between languages which is commonly obliterated by erasing the comparative work of translation. However, significant and stimulating though it is, this discussion focuses primarily on the anthropologist as an ‘outsider’ engaged in cultural translation and ‘represention’ of *another* culture with linguistic translation undertaken by the etic scholar.[7] Translations in the religious context, however, are not always undertaken by the outsider to a religious community; in fact, translations of sacred texts are often confined to the ‘insider’ and the purpose of the translation may be to communicate a particular sacred text or ritual either to another religious insider but linguistic outsider or to outsiders to both the religion and language. Since translations of religious content are undertaken for far more complex

reasons and by a variety of interlocutors using a range of translation strategies, involving self-identification, self-representation as much as the representation of others, it is pertinent to turn to the perspective of translation studies and what it brings to the table. The discussion on commensurability within translation studies is exemplified in the discussion on equivalence.

While equivalence has remained central to translation studies as a discipline, the nature and types of equivalence have been debated persistently since translators began to reflect on their translation activity and since translation studies as a discipline took formal shape in the second half of the twentieth century. This discourse on equivalence has been so important in Western academia that for scholars both within translation studies and those outside it, the two terms translation and equivalence appear as an inevitable package deal. Its preoccupation with equivalence is by all accounts what defines and—depending on which way one is inclined—distinguishes or limits translation studies. Nonetheless, this perceived central position of equivalence has proved advantageous to translation studies in one way, in that it has promoted self-reflexive, critical, inquiry into equivalence as a conceptual category of comparison.

For many translation scholars, especially of the 'prescriptive school' of translation studies of the 1960s and 70s it was sufficient to prove that 'natural' equivalents existed between languages at the level of words or texts. Their aim was to correctly identity these natural equivalences in order to achieve commensurate translations. Since then, there have been significant re-evaluations and forays on equivalence from various perspectives. Eugene Nida (1964, 1969), for instance, introduced the distinction between 'formal equivalence' at the level of formal structures of language use and 'dynamic equivalence,' which entailed reproducing a core sense to create equivalent effects on the new audience. In the context of the long history of Bible translation within which Nida formulated his theory, this offered legitimacy to the 'sense-for-sense' approach that would ordinarily have been viewed as dangerous when applied to the translation of the 'Word' of God. But by suggesting that kernels of meaning could be transferred across any human language he was able to eliminate the problem of linguistic incommensurability and non-equivalence in one move in order to ultimately replace one religion with another. Eventually embraced in Bible translation circles, his approach is also popular amongst graduate students of translation studies working on a range of texts precisely because *differences* between languages and endemic ideological differences in power between languages and cultures need no longer pose a barrier to the task of the translator.

Attacks on equivalence in translation however continued to be launched by the functionalist school within translation studies who proposed a shift of attention away from the source text to the function of its translation and its audience. 'Descriptivist Translation Studies' scholars, such as Gideon Toury (1980, 1995) and Theo Hermans

(1999), who rather than ask whether equivalence has been achieved, preferred to study the existing norms or conditions within which translations are considered equivalent and to ask the question what kind of translation equivalence and to what degree this may have been achieved. This provided a critical break in translation studies that opened up the discussion on the nature and politics of equivalence within the discipline. Postcolonialist scholars writing on translation (Das 2005, Bassnett and Trivedi 1999, Vieira 1999) have pointed out that the equivalence concept did not have substantive conceptual resonance outside Western philosophical parameters. Since then, there have also been attempts to resuscitate equivalence, most notably by Pym (2007) who suggests that instead of altogether jettisoning the concept, a focus on the *direction* of equivalence rather than its nature is more valuable. Nord (1997, 2003) has argued that the principle of loyalty added to a consideration of the function of translation is much more valuable since this entails taking into account the translator's responsibility towards all relevant partners, including the source author and the reader by clearly indicating their translation purpose, candidly discussing their translation strategies and openly justifying their translational decisions. This is certainly an ideal scenario but in cases of unequal linguistic and cultural power relations, we cannot be sanguine that translators will be in a position to display their loyalty even if they personally subscribed to such an ethical commitment. In any case, their own *religious* commitment will dictate how they view the relationship between author, text, reader and themselves as translators.

If equivalence remains one of the hardest characteristics of translation to define, how then can one offer a credible account for the survival of the concept of equivalence in translation? Equivalence as a contractual agreement between the various parties has been the most constructive way forward. Translators and consumers of translations fabricate commensurability between conceptual worlds, linguistic and textual categories in order to agree on a mutually satisfactory "translation." This may be a temporary or unstable pact between the various parties but as long as they participate voluntarily, that is, agree to a willing suspension of disbelief and "keep poetic faith" to borrow a term from Samuel Coleridge, the translation functions as an 'equivalent'. This argument is of course not new. It has been put forward by translation studies scholars such as Anthony Pym (1992) who points out that equivalence needs to be negotiated within the transactional relationship that translation creates. Theo Hermans (2007) inserts the important question of power in the debate to argue that equivalence is "pronounced" by those in authority rather than achieved in actual fact and so long as all concerned continue to treat the translation as an equivalent, the authoritative pronouncement of equivalence creates conditions under which a translation ceases to exist as a translation and acquires the status of an original. It is at this point, when a translation starts to function as the original, that equivalence is fully realized. Hermans' contention that equivalence is artificial and arbitrary, based on his analysis of the myths supporting the translations of the Septuagint and the Book of Mormon and the Christian belief in the

transubstantiation of the Eucharist, points to some significant similarities between the "leap of faith" that characterizes sacred ritual practices and beliefs on the one hand and translation acts on the other. Keeping Hermans' argument in view, it is pertinent to ask to what extent conceptualisations of translation equivalence and commensurability bring to the study of translation and/of religion? If the establishing of linguistic and textual equivalence is a deliberate, political act, how do conceptions and processes of translation determine both academic and popular understandings of religions? This conceptual translation question is as important as the linguistic since it is intrinsic to the way the various religions began to be viewed, compared and categorized, so that whether sacred terms were deemed to be translatable into other languages often determined whether newly encountered faiths were considered 'Religion.' It is this critical role of translation in establishing or rescinding the commensurability of religions that this special issue focuses on.

Contributions to this issue

The contributions to this special issue were presented at a three-day conference held at the University of Edinburgh, titled 'Translation and Religion: Interrogating Concepts, Methods and Practices' in September 2016. The conference was organized by investigators of the research project 'Conversion, Translation and the Language of Autobiography,'[8] a collaborative, interdisciplinary research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UK) examining South Asian narratives of religious conversion to Christianity from the eighteenth century onwards. The project team conducted archival research to investigate conversion accounts written by South Asians in four languages, English, German, Marathi and Tamil. Most of these accounts were also translated between these four languages, with a few re-translated more than once. The project findings on issues relating to South Asian conversion accounts are published in a special section of *South Asia* (2018).[9] While the project focused on the key role played by translation in the introduction of Christianity in South Asia and the way conversion was elicited from the eighteenth century onwards, the Edinburgh conference sought to widen the scope of the discussion. Hence, papers focusing on translation in any religious context and in relation to any pair of linguistic traditions were invited. The conference was an excellent opportunity to explore the relations between conceptual and linguistic translation processes across several religions, including Christianity, Islam, Sikhism and Tami Saivism. The keynote lecture by Alan Williams focused on the extent to which translations of Rumi's Persian Masnavi into English emphasized the philosophical and aesthetic qualities over its sacred content. Arvind Pal Mandair's keynote lecture critically appraised translations of the Sikh scriptures in colonial India within the framework of colonialism in South Asia on the one hand and on the other, the problematic and still current assumption within Religious Studies that religions are seamlessly translatable. The stimulating debate on commensurability, equivalence and identity at the conference led to the focus of this special issue.

The contributions to this special issue however do not treat an extensive range of religious traditions. Yet, although they focus mainly on translation in the Christian and Islamic contexts, with one article on Sikhism, they contribute to the field of translation and religion by offering an in-depth analysis of translation as an interpretative framework for establishing the commensurability of concepts across language cultures and of translation as an operation of power between religious cultures. While Israel and Wakankar examine the relations between Christianity and Hinduism in India, Hanna investigates Bible translation in Egypt and the relation between Christianity and Islam. O'Connor investigates the purpose of religious translation in the polarised cultural context of nineteenth-century Ireland where Protestant and Catholic book histories indicate that competitive translation and publication of popular devotional texts by both parties served to expand and unify their communities. While Dakake examines the treatment of three key Islamic terms, Tschacher focuses on disputes over Qur'an translation in South India and Singapore. Mandair investigates the role of translation technology in creating identities between two registers of Punjabi and English for the Sikh diaspora communities.

The contributors address the key role played by translation in the construction and circulation of religious concepts, where translations function to confirm identity, as elaborated upon earlier, as a 'regime of representation. The contributors examine in particular the role played by conceptual terms and terms of reference in the study of religion which have deep roots in specific religious traditions—most notably in Christianity—against which other religions and their texts are measured. All the contributors investigate how in one form or another, comparisons with Christianity have influenced not only scholarly debates on the construction of religions and religious concepts but also impacted scholarly views of translation and attitudes to languages in each religious context studied. They argue that postulating a crude identity, these translations 'stultify' their representation to a mechanical reiteration of texts in another language rather than pointing to a differentiated set of unique meanings.

Dakake examines the ease with which three Qur'anic terms *dīn*, *islām* and *īmān* are usually considered commensurable with the English terms, religion, God and faith or belief. She argues that this very ease of 'identity' between the Arabic and English terms, also therefore considered representative of 'identity' between Islam and Christianity, is deceptive and in fact conceals the polysemic usage of these terms in the Qur'an and Islamic traditions of exegesis. Unlike Karamustafa (2017: 169) who has recently argued that a historical consideration of the term *dīn* indicates that there is a need for "a reconceputalisation of Islam as a category other than 'religion,' Dakake here argues that the concept of 'religion' as a universal human phenomenon has had long antecedents within Islam which developed independent of and distinct from the Christian and post-Enlightenment views of religion. Dakake contends that paying

attention to translation and their pre-modern usage allows us to recognize the wider semantic range of the three terms within Islam and the conceptual limitations that are placed on them when they are repeatedly identified as commensurable with standard English/Christian counterparts in translation. Significantly, Dakake's examination of the inaccurate application of identity in translation also allows her to intervene in the post-Enlightenment 'secular' discourse and current academic debate on the critique of the category of religion.

Hanna's article on the translation of the New Testament into colloquial Arabic in the early decades of the twentieth century examines the significance of the identity established between language and religion. Viewing the controversy over the Arabic New Testament entitled A*l-Khabar al-Ṭayyib bitāʿ Yasūʿ al-Masīḥ* (1927), undertaken for an Egyptian Christian audience by the British engineer William Willcocks, as a site of cultural encounter between languages and religions, Hanna critically examines the identification of Arabic with Islam and the Qur'an, which renders the language conceptually inappropriate and problematic for translations of other religious texts, such as the Bible. Hanna examines the debate on the 'sacredness' of Arabic in early twentieth-century Egypt which sought to restrict its usage, and especially its high classical form, for Islamic purposes. In this context, the use of the colloquial *ʿāmmiyya* for translating the New Testament was a rather controversial decision, since for the Egyptian Christian community too, like their Egyptian Islamic counterparts, it was the *fuṣḥa* or classical Arabic that was associated with scripture. It is important to note here Islamic convictions about revelation: that the Qur'an *is* the very Word of God revealed in clear Arabic speech. This close identification of a specific language register with sacrality meant that a colloquial Arabic New Testament was perceived as interfering with the sacred *content* and *meaning* of Christian scripture. But not only was this translation perceived as challenging the notion that the identification between the ultimate truth and higher language registers ought to be preserved, it also in effect sustained the Qur'an's claim to truth through its use of classical Arabic. Hanna argues that the counter argument for this translation decision is offered from a theological vantage point: the descent to the lower *ʿāmmiyya* could actually help Egyptian readers to identify the New Testament with Christ's descent to human form. That is, the incarnation of Christ was symbolised through the use of colloquial Arabic and that this translation was therefore in closer identification to the Christian gospel "of emptying of the self" than existing classical translations, a theme that is picked up in the South Asian context in Wakankar's contribution.

Israel examines the 'identity' assumed in the concept of translation and what it entails across disparate religious and language cultures. Israel argues that the concept of translation as faithful and equivalent transfer (in order to establish linguistic and textual identity) is most commonly used across the humanities but especially in religious studies and anthropology of religions. This definition of translation, according to her, which derives its conceptual force from *Christian* notions of faithful transfer of

sacred objects is assumed to be a self-evident, universal category that can be applied to any non-Christian religious community; however, this is very different from the way translation has been conceptualized in other language cultures, such as those of South Asia. Therefore, when studying the impact of linguistic translation on conversion to Christianity, it is important not only to investigate the different concepts of religion or conversion, but also what *translation* may mean when defined from non-Christian perspectives. Linguistic translation may not always be understood as the process of arriving at identity between two languages, instead conceptual metaphors such as repetition of form *or* meaning or a proliferation of texts and meaning, suggest a different relationship between texts and languages and how their effects are perceived. If translation plays a constitutive role in religious conversion (and especially in conversions to Christianity), she observes it is important to recognize that a Eurocentric conceptualization of translation may also have influenced the construction of Eurocentric conceptions of religion in South Asia. Examining different materials written by South Asians converting to Christianity (theological, literary and autobiographical), Israel argues in favour of taking into account alternative metaphors of translation, such as 'avataram' that doubles up both as a term for the human incarnation of the divine as well as for linguistic translation as a space where non-identical relationships can be traced. It is when multiple conceptions of translation are not taken into account in scholarly discussions, she argues, that translation functions as a 'regime of representation.'

Mandair points out how translations of Sikh texts into Western languages, especially English has served to obscure the complexity of Sikh conceptualizations of the divine. Mandair examines the transformative role played by translation software technology, 'Sikhi-to-the-Max,' in simultaneously presenting to the Sikh diaspora the Sikh *gurbani* in Gurmukhi, English translation and a translation of the gurbani in modern Punjabi, presented in roman transliteration. These three language versions of the gurbani, in two scripts, mediate between affective experiences of scriptural text and language, and scriptural recitation and music. Mandair is interested in how this new software translation technology is a material mediation between 'language, identity and world-making' that he finds embedded in Sikh scripture. He argues that this software technology organizes encounters between different languages, between different generations of the Sikh community and ultimately between actual and virtual realities. He challenges the supposedly neutral role that English is supposed to play in translating between classical gurbani and modern Punjabi, as if English can replace the first and as easily transform into the latter. The dual sense of identity at play here, in effect blocks access to the source gurbani rather than offer unrestricted access to it. However, argues Mandair, that the use of translation technology to refract the three language versions and display them simultaneously also has the effect of resisting complete identification of the three versions or translations of Sikh scriptures. The premise on which translation technology works and its role in the construction of religious meaning has been researched very little so far which makes Mandair's

contribution particularly significant for both scholars of religions and translation studies scholars working on machine translation, translation technologies and the interface between materiality, language and virtual reality.

O'Connor interprets the polemical use of translation in increasing the numbers of popular devotional texts in the Irish Marian tradition and their significance in fostering a sense of identity for the Catholic community under Protestant attack in the nineteenth century. Drawing on print and book history in the religious context, O'Connor argues that popular devotional texts in English translation functioned to reinvigorate a sense of communal identity, *differentiating* them from the Protestants within Ireland but at the same time allowed an identification with the global Irish community. The social history of religious translation in nineteenth-century Ireland indicates according to O'Connor, the close alignment of 'identity' between the categories of Irishness and Catholicism and simultaneously differentiation from Protestants. Further, faithfulness in translation was repeatedly claimed as the correct translation approach employed by translators and attested to be so by reviewers, which allowed them to set up conceptual 'identities' between European source texts approved by the Vatican and Irish translations. O'Connor sees this claim of 'faithfulness' and 'equivalence' as a political act rather than statements on actual theological or linguistic commensurability. This identification of source and target texts was therefore vital for establishing social and religious identification between the Irish Catholics and the European centres of Catholic power and authority.

Tschacher argues that there is a contradiction in the usual distinction drawn between attitudes to Qur'an translation and Protestant attitudes to Bible translation. He shows us related issues of identity that pose difficulty for the scholar of Islamic translation: first, that the identification of Protestant ideologies of translation with a generalized notion of translation have had a bearing on scholarly interpretations of Qur'anic translation; and second, that this identification has influenced the view that changes in attitude to Qur'anic translation result from the same historical and social impulses of 'reform' as those of Protestant Christianity and therefore had similar effects as Protestant translations of the Bible are thought to have had. Tschacher's contention is that such an argument can only be made by ignoring several centuries of Qur'anic translation in Persia and South Asia. Further, that rather than Qur'anic translation following Protestant Bible translation in the project of reform, Qur'an translators in South Asia used the Protestant paradigm to legitimate their actions. Tschacher critically unpacks the politics of religious reform mobilized both within the nineteenth-century Tamil Muslim community and in current scholarly studies of South Asian Qur'an translation to demonstrate that the identity assumed between reformist Qur'an translation projects and Protestant translations of the Bible is not a 'historical fact' but an ideological construct that has served translators and scholars alike to strategically argue their case.

Wakankar turns our attention to shifts in the use of Marathi in nineteenth-century South Asia to study the effects of Protestant Christianity on religious language and translation. Focusing on what he terms the "everyday use of language" Wakankar argues that translation in late nineteenth-century missionary writing signaled an emergent stance of humility that registered as a temporary renunciation of agency on the microscopic, banal, everyday level. Wakanker contends that there is an 'identity,' as argued in this special issue, operating in the intersections of concepts of language and humility within Christianity as they enter into the nineteenth-century Marathi public sphere through autobiography, lexical rectifications, and the general literary representation of "conversion" all grounded in an engagement with the banal, mundane, and everyday. Wakankar thus offers us a reading of three sets of materials, an autobiographical account of conversion to Christianity, the construction of a Marathi-English dictionary where the compilers attempted to differentiate a range of synonyms from the highest to the lowest registers of Marathi and the writings of social and religious 'reformers' that show a similar turn to the everyday. This transformation toward "subjective self-expression" was attached to a shift in Marathi itself, he argues. Wakankar contributes to our understandings of language, time, and conversion in western India by calling attention to "the inner fold of conversion" preceding the opening out of the public.

This special issue highlights translation as a site of critical encounter where religions interface with a range of phenomena that shape them and where questions of identity and difference arise. Translation projects are 'contact zones' (Pratt 1992) that facilitate the encounter between religions, between the religious and the 'secular', between religion as belief and religion as practice, between the linguistically expressible and the inexpressible. The complexities of translation at a linguistic level serve to accentuate conceptual misalignments in translation studies and other fields of thought and inquiry but also invite us to think about ways to re-calibrate definitions and critically analyse how religious concepts and ideas mutate as they travel from one conceptual universe to another. Paying attention to translation processes and practices encourages us to move from assumptions of universal categories, where we all know what we mean when we use a term, to an awareness of what social and historical forces have allowed us to work with these universals or in contrast to challenge them. Current trends in translation theory point us to issues of power and function in translation (Gentzler and Tymoczko 2002, Tymoczko 2007, Venuti 1995), which urge us to recognize that the terms of a debate premised on 'equivalents', translatability or the untranslatable, good or bad translations, successful or unsuccessful, theologically sound or unsound translations are deeply imbricated in wider and deeper networks of power beyond individual religions, languages and translation projects. A discussion of linguistic equivalence implies a whole network of conceptual identities that are not naturally inherent to languages or cultures but have been constructed and are at work implicitly. The mismatches in linguistic equivalence disrupt the assumed smooth workings of conceptual equivalence or identities that

posit a naturalised, unproblematic mapping of one sacred worldview over another. In doing so, they also alert us to the disruptive, challenging potential of translation to question imagined conceptual equivalences or incommensurabilities between sacred cultures.

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[1] I wish to state at the outset that although Matthias Frenz and I had originally planned to write this introduction together, he was unable, due to unforeseen circumstances, to do so in the end. Matthias contributed immensely to the thematic conceptualisation of this special issue and has co-edited this volume and I owe him much appreciation for his help and encouragement throughout the process.
[2] See Ludo Rocher (1984) for a detailed discussion of the reception of a text purporting to be a French translation of the *Ezourvedam* but was in fact found to be a forgery possibly composed by Jesuit missionaries.
[3] F. Max Müller, for instance, was one such nineteenth-century scholar who proposed comparative methods in the study of both languages and religions, and promoted amongst other things, 'the missionary alphabet' as a universal system of transliteration to serve the philologist, historian and missionary alike (*Proposals for a Missionary Alphabet*, 1854: 1)
[4] Eugine A Nida's ouvre, well rehearsed in translation studies, displays such a focus.
[5] As mentioned earlier, Mandair's focus on translation to argue the construction of Sikhism as a religion is an exception.
[6] Smith points out that "On True Religion" or "On Genuine Worship" would have been a 'closer translation'.
[7] For a detailed analysis of the anthropology debate from the standpoint of translation studies, see Kate Sturge (2007) *Representing Others: Translation, Ethnography and the Museum,* Manchester: St. Jerome. For a post-

structuralist examination of "translation as representation" which engages with key debates in anthropology, see Tejaswani Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism and the Colonial Context,* Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1992.

[8] See project website for more details: http://www.ctla.llc.ed.ac.uk/

[9] Narratives of Transformation: Religious conversion and Indian traditions of 'Life Writing,' guest edited by H. Israel and J. Zavos, *South Asia*. 41, 2, p. 352-365.